

VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE FRAMES OF ART AND LIFE

Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life

C. RUTH MILLER
Assistant Professor of English
University of Toronto

M
MACMILLAN
PRESS

© C. Ruth Miller 1988

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1988 978-0-333-44880-9

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended), or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 33-4 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7DP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1988

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset by Wessex Typesetters
(Division of The Eastern Press Ltd)
Frome, Somerset

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Miller, C. Ruth

Virginia Woolf: the frames of art and life.

1. Woolf, Virginia—Criticism and interpretation

I. Title

823'.912 PR6045.072Z/

ISBN 978-1-349-19597-8

ISBN 978-1-349-19595-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-19595-4

To Lawrence

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
1 Art and Life	1
The Frame	1
The Opposition of Art and Life	3
The Relationships between Art and Life	11
The Reconciliation of Art and Life	18
To See Life Steadily and See It Whole	22
The Necessity of Frames	31
2 Towards a Defence of the Novel	41
Literature among the Arts	44
(i) The Attraction to Painting	44
(ii) The Attraction to Music	51
(iii) Reservations	55
(iv) The Defence of Words	60
The Novel among the Genres	63
(i) The Generic Spectrum	63
(ii) The Most Pliable of All Forms	69

3 Frames	75
Rooms	77
Thresholds	87
Mirrors	92
Windows	100
<i>Notes</i>	112
<i>Bibliography</i>	123
<i>Index</i>	132

Preface

The frame is one of many metaphors and models Virginia Woolf derived from painting, and, judging from critical response, one of the least obtrusive. Still, the frames in her writings and her exploration of the principles of framing reveal the extent to which she anticipated the contemporary interest in the threat that the marginal poses to the integrity of the centre. The frame, which charts the disputed border between life and art, is the archetype of the marginal. Recently, literary theorists have been drawn to the model provided by the frame and have suggested that it does not merely mark but, in fact, defines the difference between life and art. As Stanley Fish has noted, 'literature . . . is language around which we have drawn a frame, a frame that indicates a decision to regard with a particular self-consciousness the resources language has always possessed'.¹

In Virginia Woolf's writings, the frame is often portrayed as a representative of the ordering powers of art. Framing encourages the selective vision needed to perceive the enclosed scene as a unified work of art, but Virginia Woolf was suspicious of the limitations and distortions that such a process entails. This distrust, evident throughout her writings, prompted R. L. Chambers to describe her works as successful attempts 'to take the frame from the picture'.² Yet, as the analysis of her views on art and life in Chapter 1 reveals, Virginia Woolf recognised that frames are necessary, in life as well as art.

The frame typifies the arbitrary conventions required to identify and circumscribe works of art. As a writer, Virginia Woolf was particularly interested in its literary equivalent. Recently, semi-ologists have examined the way in which extra-literary material such as book covers, title-pages and prefaces perform the role of a frame, but, usually, literary 'framing' refers to the practice of embedding one narrative in another. While Virginia Woolf used this technique – conspicuously in *Between the Acts* – there is evidence that she also conceived of a literary frame that resembled the frame of a painting more directly, one that would create the effect of spatial boundaries. A difficulty she frequently addresses in her diaries is to find a way to 'enclose' (D2, p. 13) or 'contain' (D3, p. 18) the works she envisaged, a way 'to embody . . . the exact

shapes my brain holds' (D4, p. 53). In the early stages of *The Waves*, she noted in her diary that she 'was not satisfied . . . with the frame' (D3, p. 219). As will be seen in Chapter 2, the principal advantage of the novel, for Virginia Woolf, was the flexibility of its frame.

Virginia Woolf's attitude towards framing provides an insight into her views on art and life and her criteria for comparisons among the arts and genres. Yet critical attention tends to be confined to the frames within her works.³ Most frequently noted is the framing effect of the window in *To the Lighthouse*.⁴ The examination of these frames in Chapter 3, however, reveals that the passing references that are generally made to their effects in studies of Virginia Woolf do not comprehend the various and complex ways in which they serve as both instances and emblems of her theories of art.

In writing this book I have not followed a chronological pattern, but this should not be taken to suggest that Virginia Woolf's theories of art remained unchanged throughout the course of her career. I have deliberately avoided a chronological approach because it almost inevitably results in the developmental fallacy – the often implicit assumption that each work in a writer's canon represents a refinement of its predecessor. Very few would argue that this is true of Virginia Woolf. The structure of this book is circular rather than linear: the third and final chapter provides the specific examples that prompted the theories outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.

I wish, finally, to thank Professors Henry Auster, Susan Dick, Gary Harrington and Michael Millgate for their advice and encouragement. To Professor S. P. Rosenbaum, I am especially indebted for scrupulous guidance. I cannot presume, in a few words, to thank my husband, Lawrence Miller, for the kind of support and assistance that I have grown to depend upon.

Acknowledgements

The extracts from *Between the Acts*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Collected Essays*, volume 2 by Virginia Woolf, copyright © 1978, 1950, 1941, 1927, 1925 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., renewed 1969, 1955, 1953 by Leonard Woolf, are reprinted by kind permission of the Estate of Virginia Woolf, The Hogarth Press, and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

List of Abbreviations

BA	<i>Between the Acts</i>
BP	<i>Books and Portraits</i>
D1, D2, D3, D4, D5	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> , 5 vols
E1, E2, E3, E4	<i>Collected Essays</i> , 4 vols
HH	<i>A Haunted House and Other Short Stories</i>
JR	<i>Jacob's Room</i>
L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i> , 6 vols
MB	<i>Moments of Being</i>
MD	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i>
ND	<i>Night and Day</i>
O	<i>Orlando: A Biography</i>
RF	<i>Roger Fry: A Biography</i>
RO	<i>A Room of One's Own</i>
TL	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
VO	<i>The Voyage Out</i>
W	<i>The Waves</i>
Y	<i>The Years</i>